THE MAKING OF A SOCIAL DEMOCRAT

by Paul Feldman

[Paul Feldman is currently public relations director for the Midwest Region of the United Steelworkers, which he joined in 1976. Paul was an editor of the Social Democrats' publication New America from its founding in 1960 to 1974 and is a vice-chairman of SDUSA].

The topic I was assigned on the original program was "The History of American Socialism." That topic's too heavy for me; I'm a lightweight. On the latest program the topic has been changed to "An Evening on American Socialism." That's still too heavy a meal for me. What I'm here to offer you is a snack on the Social Democrats, USA.

I'll discuss the social democratic movement's birth pangs, traumas and maturation to its present stage: what I call the pre-teens or early adolescent period. This, as you know, can be a very tumultuous and critical period in any child's or organization's development. In this stage you can move forward to adulthood or you can regress back to childhood. Often adolescents move both ways at the same time. Sometimes we're not sure which way we're going. But I feel optimistic, particularly about our youth organization and many of the people in it.

I'm going to talk to you about the birth of the Social Democrats from my own experience of that development, from the vantage point of one of the SD's earliest victims: me. I'm going to talk to you a little about the founding generation of Social Democrats, USA, my peers, and a lot about the old Socialist Party, because that's where it all began. I'll talk a lot about my peers. Some of them you'll know, some of them you won't. Some of the incidents you'll know, some of them you'll find out about.

I'm going to tell you about your ancestors. Some of them are getting to be ancient ancestors. I'm going to tell you about some of our movement's mistakes and blemishes as well as our shining moments and great accomplishments; we have both. I'll tell you both sides of the story for two reasons. Those of you who already are social democrats and a part of our political family have a right to know about the skeletons in the closet, the mad uncles and aunts, as well as the saints and heroes; the imbeciles and, if I can use the word, ass-holes, as well as the brilliant leaders and pathfinders. I hope these stories will make you feel more a part of the family. After I relate some of these stories, some of you who don't have strong stomachs may leave the organization. But I have confidence most of you won't. Those of you who are not yet a part of our family I hope will want to join it. As well as being an organization of

human beings with faults and good qualities as all human beings have, our movement, I believe, has a great tradition and deep democratic principles, much deeper than most organizations, besides the labor movement, of which I've been a member.

The second reason I will be telling you these stories is that I don't want you to repeat the errors of my generation of socialists and social democrats. After all, if you repeat our errors, they will not be unique deviations on the path of social democracy, but stupid political blunders. You have to make your own unique errors, not ours, or we will get resentful.

Before I tell you my sad story, let me tell you what the social democratic movement can make out of you. The SDUSA can make a skinny, ascetic-looking Catholic boy an assistant to the head of the AFL-CIO. The SDUSA can make a skinny Brooklyn girl from a working class background with a great desire to escape into English literature into the director of what is probably the largest teachers' organization in the world. The SD can make a chubbier Brooklyn girl into a COPE director of the American Federation of Teachers. The SD can make a fledgling black musician into the director of the largest and most important black labor organization in America. The SD can make a young descendant of William Penn, who is seeking to recapture some of the earlier greatness and virtue of the America in which his family played a part, into the producer of Ben Wattenberg's TV series and a scourge of the authoritarian Left's immoral minority. The SDUSA can take another erect, moralistic and steadfast youth whose parents are ranchers in Colorado, and turn him into a top national COPE activist. The SD can take a young lady whose father was a judge on Long Island, and send her out into the hinterlands of Ohio as an AFL-CIO staff representative, and we don't see her that much anymore. The SDUSA can even make a young Jewish boy from Brooklyn with more than his share of hostility looking for a constructive outlet into a public relations person -- or, as my enemies call me, a hatchet man -- for the Steelworkers.

Yes, the social democratic movement can perform countless human miracles, many of which I don't have time to describe here. It can also make you a burnout, a kook or a political snob.

After the Young People's Socialist League collapsed, we built the Social Democrats. The first three national secretaries of the Young Social Democrats disappeared. I mean, in the middle of their tenure they just up and left. My cousin Eliot was one of them; he left and wouldn't speak to me again for ten years. But then he got over it. These are some of the sacrifices people made. Most of them have come back and they're right back around the movement. But, as turnover alone indicates, this was a very difficult time.

My first experience with American socialism, or one tendency, actually a sect, a significant sect, within it, came at Brooklyn College, where I was a less than dedicated student. My first brush with American communism came much earlier; it came in my neighborhood in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, which collected more money for the Russian war relief and signed more petitions to open a second front against Hitler in the Second World War than any other neighborhood in America. I learned to sing every word of the Soviet national anthem in my assembly. I never learned all the words of the Star-Spangled Banner. I was a proud member of the Soviet Sea Scouts. What I mean to say is, communist ideas pervaded my whole community. If the truth be told, and I'm here to tell the truth as I know it, the American communist movement was and remains a far better organizer of diverse people on a local and national level than the American socialist movement ever was. And until we become as able as they are, we're going to have plenty of problems.

The American communists acquired their great skill in organizing in part by luck and an accident of history. It was when Nazi Germany indecently stabbed its sister totalitarian power, the gool ol' USSR, in the back, and broke the Hitler-Stalin Pact, that Moscow forced the American Communist Party kicking and screaming into the mainstream of American political life, where the Socialist Party wouldn't be found dead. American communists stopped calling the United States an imperialistic war-monger state and started calling it the second most important fortress of freedom in the world. I don't have to tell you what was the first most important fortress of freedom. Hitler transformed American communism into twentieth century Americanism. That was the communist slogan during the Second World War. It led the Communist Party to the discovery that Thomas Jefferson and George Washington were really agrarian communists.

At Brooklyn College I didn't really become a communist, because something bothered me about them. They kept telling us we were like everybody else, and I wanted to be unique. They kept telling us we were a hundred percent American, but I was an alienated intellectual.

At Brooklyn College I was a leader of the cultural revolution at that college, and a devotee of Ernest Hemingway and books about the Spanish Civil War and black motorcycle jackets. I was therefore naturally attracted to a little band of school politicos who also wore black jackets. They had certain bohemian tendencies and were very strong about intellectual pursuits and were more serious about ideas than I was. That was interesting for me.

This little band was led by a boy named Tom, that is Tom Kahn, whom some of you know and some of you don't, and a girl named Rachelle Horowitz. They also were very infrequent students. They brought me to one of their meetings after school to hear Max Shachtman, who was then the leader of the

Independent Socialist League, which was a split-off from the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP was was Trotskyist or Trotskyite group. There's a very important difference, but I still don't know what it is. But there were bitter fights back then about who was Trotskyist and who was Trotskyite. I hope you'll find out what the difference is and tell me.

Tom and Rachelle composed the major part of the ISL's youth group in Brooklyn, and they were very active. Shachtman was speaking on Soviet communism. Tom and Rachelle wanted me especially to hear that talk because they could see that I was wishy-washy on the question of communism. I was wishy-washy on every question, since I was an Adlai Stevenson Democrat. To them Democrats and Republicans were Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

In criticising Stalinist Russia, Shachtman said that socialism without democracy is like air: if you remove an atom from a carbon dioxide molecule it becomes carbon monoxide, and from life-giving it becomes lethal. Being very erudite at the time, I concluded without ever taking a course in chemistry that Shachtman was a bit simplistic. But there was something about the man -- a shining, balding head; twinkling eyes, an intensity and aggressive manner -- which I found attractive. Shachtman was a living piece of history, and for a romantically inclined intellectual type like me, meeting a living piece of history makes a very big impression. Shachtman was an early leader of the communist youth movement in the United States. He witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution -- not all of it, but he was over there for a few weeks and could talk about it. He broke from the Communist Party to follow Trotsky after Stalin crushed the Bolshevik opposition. Max became a secretary and bodyguard to the great Trotsky. Then he broke with Trotsky over Finland. That was a long time ago, and it's not important in itself, but why Max broke is important. Trotsky, despite all Stalin did to him, his family and his comrades -- like murdering most of the early Bolshevik leaders -- supported Stalin's invasion of Finland because it overthrew bourgeois property and replaced it with nationalized property. That for Trotsky was the key issue. And even if there was the Bureaucratic Deformation -- Stalin was some bureacratic deformation -- the fact that Soviet communism had nationalized property made it more progressive than any form of capitalism, and soon the rest would work itself out.

Tom and Rachelle introduced me to the many intellectual splendors of the International Socialist League. The ISL and the people in it had a big influence on the Socialist Party, and eventually on the Social Democrats. The splendors of the ISL at the time included Michael Harrington, a Catholic radical who was not only the boy genius of American Marxism, but who also understood Proust, Stendhal and Freud, and could talk on these subjects at the drop of a hat. Not only that, he was a wine connoisseur and knew Irish revolutionary songs. Now that's a renaissance man. I later found out he had a few faults.

Then there was Cy Landy, who knew every political tendency in the Burmese Marxist movement, every one of them. I didn't even know there was a Burmese Marxist movement. But he did, and could talk about it at the drop of a hat and at enormous length. Then there was Herman Benson, who was a geniune worker. He owned a machine shop and worked for trade union reform. He taught me the difference between the progressive and the conservative wings of the labor movement. The UAW and Walter Reuther -- although not always Walter Reuther -- were on the progressive side, and George Meany and the whole rest of the labor movement were on the conservative side, including the United Steelworkers, which I now work for. The progressive wing of the labor movement included Walter Reuther on some days and on other days we didn't even believe it included Walter Reuther.

Then there was the exotic Bogdan Denitch, who was a Yugoslavian revolutionary as an infant. At least that's what he told me. Bogdan had the uncanny ability to instigate multiple faction fights on principled issues in order to get himself into organizational positions that he coveted. Bogdan, bless his soul, is now the leader of the left wing of Harrington's Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, and I can only say more power to Bogdan.

I could have been happy in the ISL for the rest of my life. I was unique, everybody was unique; we had unique ideas, unique ideology, unique organization. I was sheltered from the world in what Irving Howe likes to call a world more attractive, the sectarian world, the world of our own movement. But that wild man Schactman forced us out of that bliss because he felt the ISL was too isolated. With great difficulty, Schactman accomplished a merger with that mainstream political group, the Socialist Party.

The ISL followed Max into the merger kicking and screaming. Many in the ISL were never able to cross that great divide between revolution and reformism. Many of them remained fixated within the ISL, even though it didn't exist anymore. They were still in the ISL emotionally, and many of them are still there. As for the other half of this wedding, most of the Socialist Partyniks had to be dragged kicking and screaming, too.

The merger of this odd political couple could never have taken place without the blessings of Norman Thomas and the maneuverings of Socialist Party National Secretary Irwin Suall, who later fired me from my first SP job--office mimeographer--because I showed dual loyalty between the SP and the US Post Office, which paid me better for a part time job that I had. Irwin didn't believe that was a principled position.

In any case, the unity convention of the ISL and the SP was a gas. The convention broke the participants down -- broke them down is the right phrase --

into workshop sessions so we could all become more familiar with each other. I went to the civil rights workshop with my two revolutionary youth colleagues Tom and Rachelle, who as always were dressed in black. We were greeted at the door by a small, white-haired man dressed in a boy scout suit with short boy scout pants and a neckerchief, who was to lead the session. He turned out to be the former Socialist Party vice-presidential candidate, Darlington Hoopes, a very nice man who actually was a boy scout troopmaster. His wife Hazelette Hoops -- Darlington and Hazelette, beautiful names -- was also present. Darlington and Hazelette made an interesting couple.

Later that evening, over many beers, we designed a presidential campaign for Darlington on the Socialist ticket. Our slogan was Whoops for Hoopes. The campaign never got off the ground.

The ISL had its problems and its sectarians and its strange formulations, and so did the SP. It had almost every socialist tendency outside outright communism within it. I was an admirer of Norman Thomas because he stuck to the socialist movement all his life and was dedicated to its principles. He tried to keep the feuding socialist movement together at all costs. I think we paid for that, because it was an unlivable organization. There was a European social democratic tendency which wanted to build a mass party like the British Labour Party or the German Social Democratic Party, and wanted to do it exactly the same way. If they did it in England and Germany, they figured, why can't we do it in the United States? Now maybe you know why they couldn't, but they didn't. Then there was a city planning, or sewer socialist, grouping. That was the friendly name. They loved to redesign the city. They were very deeply into this. The leader of that group -- a very nice man, a dedicated man -- Seymour Steinsapir, used to keep the SP membership cards locked in a safe because he didn't want to let anybody take them out of his hands. After the March on Washington, in which our people played a major role and which was one of the great moments in our movement's history, we had a convention. At the convention we had a reception, and a couple of kids came in to play their banjo and guitar. They were playing and singing, when Seymour said to them, "Get out, you're making a nuisance here." Those kids were Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. That sort of indicated to us young folks that there were elements in the Party that were not ready to get with the new developments.

There was also a pacifist wing in the Party, which was headed by David McReynolds, among others. It had a tendency to drift in Moscow's direction every time the free world raised a hand to defend itself militarily against the Soviet Union. But, thank goodness, both in the ISL and in the SP there was also a sensible element, which wanted to orient itself towards the mainstream of the labor movement and to participate in the Democratic Party with the labor movement to transform that party. This was the group that Shachtman and some of the leading elements of the ISL joined.

We followed and gave up our revolutionary romanticism an inch at a time. Max's persuasiveness, combined with the real struggle of the civil rights movement, moved us deeply. A Democratic Party orientation made sense, because we were convinced that if southern blacks got the vote they would unseat the Dixiecrats, and that there was at the time a major struggle beginning in the Democratic Party over civil rights between the liberal-labor wing of the Party on one side and the Dixiecrats and the other conservatives on the other. So we could see some connection between getting involved in civil rights and the Democratic Party. Our people even worked out a novel strategic conception called realignment, whereby the liberal-labor wing of the Democratic Party would replace the Dixiecrats and the machines. Our opposition to the Dixiecrats and our civil rights work were right on target, but the efforts to break up the machines didn't work out exactly as we expected. The machines, bad as they were, had a decent relationship with the labor movement. What replaced these machines that we were so intent on breaking up -- and we didn't think too carefully about what would replace them -- was the anti-labor New Politics, middle class liberal wing of the Party, which was the precursor of McGovernism and which was to become a curse of our social democratic existence. We had to learn the hard way that you shouldn't just listen to what a person says, you should watch what he does and compare the two. At the time, we believed in our rhetoric and ideas more than anything, so we listened to what people said more than we watched what they did.

Our first escapade in the Democratic Party didn't turn out so perfectly; it was consistent with our ideas but it wasn't consistent with reality. The first candidate in the Democratic Party we supported was naturally the most radical and the most socialist. We supported someone who was called a Reform Democrat, but he wasn't democratic at all; he was a radical in the Democratic Party. His name was Mark Lane. We supported him for Congress. Mark was red hot against the Dixiecrats, which was fine, but he was also red hot for something else which wasn't so fine: the good ol' USSR. His campaign manager was Jack Newfield, later of Village Voice fame, who joined the SP to advance his and Mark's career. Newfield's slogan for Mark, as I remember, was Mark Lane: The Voice of the Voiceless. This made some of the older socialists uneasy; it had an elitist ring to them. We thought it was great.

Thank God Mark lost. Some of you will remember Mark in another capacity: as a lawyer for Jim Jones of Jonestown.

In those days, we were deeply involved in the civil rights movement. This led to one of the truly great contributions our movement made, as it is making today by what it is doing in the Polish crisis. We were also distracted by internal problems. We always had a lot of internal problems. The Socialist Party's youth organization was led at the time by the realignment and civil

rights-oriented people. They were the most effective and most capable leaders in the SP's youth group, the Young People's Socialist League. But they were not a large group, and they came under severe challenge from the Left, the peacenik wing of the youth. The latter finally won out, using every sectarian and ultra-radical idea that has an appeal to youth to win the leadership of the organization. No sooner did the left wing of the youth triumph than it split into four factions, each contending with the other over which was the most left wing. Naturally, they destroyed the organization. And then this left wing did something no other YPSL leadership had ever done. The leadership of the YPSL has done some wild things, but this group did something unprecedented and history-making. The left-wing youth declared the organization, and the entire democratic socialist movement, politically, morally and financially bankrupt. Then they voted the organization out of existence. The only lasting monument to that youth group, to that wing of the socialist youth movement, is a monument that's not even there anymore: a hole in the wall of our old office on Broadway. That hole -- it was interesting -- was exactly the shape of the head of the chairman of the YPSL at the time, Mike Shute. It was an exact replica of his head because his head was pushed into the wall. I'm not ashamed to say that I was the one who pushed his head into the wall. I'm glad he survived. He survived to run out the door and down the stairs, which was probably the most athletic thing he had ever done in his life. Mike Shute, who was very deep in ideological thoughts, didn't understand that there are such things as fighting words.

Charges were brought against me for this brutality. These charges still stand in the SP annals. I'm trying to get them expunged to protect my reputation.

We really did something good in the civil rights movement. It was amazing. It demonstrated how effective a small group that is dedicated and knows what it's doing can be. Max, Tom, Rachelle and Norm Hill recruited Bayard Rustin, who was the leading tactician in the civil rights movement. They helped connect him with labor people. Tom, Bayard and Norm worked out the theory of coalition politics. The article they wrote about it, which appeared in Commentary magazine, was absolutely brilliant. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and all the other more radical elements in the civil rights movement tried to fight against the idea, but the theory that a minority had to combine with other social forces that had similar interests was overwhelmingly effective. The idea that blacks had to combine with labor and others was an idea that came out of our movement. It provided the strategic direction for the March on Washington. Bayard was the tactician who brought all these groups together.

Bayard worked closely with A. Philip Randolph, a great socialist and an honorary chairman of our party. Tom wrote the speech to the AFL-CIO convention

in which Randolph spoke on behalf of black trade unionists and civil rights. There was a dispute between Randolph and some of the leaders of the AFL-CIO, including George Meany. It was really a misunderstanding. I think Meany later said that Randolph was right. But there had never been anything like the civil rights movement in the history of labor, and it took time for some of the older leaders to adapt to it. Our movement helped them adapt. We built the A. Philip Randolph Institute, which still stands as one of our greatest accomplishments.

I don't have time to go into the decline of the civil rights movement and the pothole that the authoritarian Left and ultra-nationalist elements got it into, but this misdirection cut the movement short and didn't allow it to develop into a strong enough alliance with labor to really deal with the economic crisis. I remember in the end we were working with Norm in the Committee for Racial Equality. We were trying to outradicalize the left wing. So we ended up sitting on the Triborough Bridge and blocking traffic. It didn't really work, because the Left then just announced that they would paralyze all the highways and the subway system. So there was nothing we could really do to beat them at this game.

I remember writing the justification for blocking traffic. Penn Kemble and I got drunk and wrote that we didn't really want to bother people, we only wanted to stop them for a minute so that they could look at the poverty in Harlem and see how bad it was on their way to the suburbs. Now this sounded like a good idea, but, you know, stop working people on their way home... I was never so glad to see the cops come.

That was when I found out how gullible the news media are. The leading columnist of the New York Times took our statement, which we had written in a drunken stupor, printed it in a leading article, took it seriously and made what we did appear very moving. And all this was, was a power struggle within the civil rights movement between those who wanted to keep it on an integrationist course and those who wanted to move it towards Black Power, separatism and violence.

I'd like to tell you a little bit about the split between Social Democrats, USA and Michael Harrington's Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. Some people say that the split was about Vietnam. That's baloney. At the height of the Vietnam war, when all the killing was going on, we sat down with Harrington in a restaurant and worked out a compromise position on Vietnam, which you could read as advocating unconditional withdrawal or you could read as favoring a negotiated settlement. Anybody who is in this business knows how to write resolutions that everybody can be happy about or at least live with. Harrington was happy because he had something to show his friends in the univer-

sity and the Village. We were happy because we didn't feel like we sold the Vietnamese out. We were one happy family. What split the socialist movement was something entirely different. It was the conflict in the Democratic Party between the McGovernite, or New Politics, movement and the labor movement. It was over McGovern and Humphrey. When the New Politics movement and the campus radicals in the SDS became strong and forced that conflict, that was when the movement split. Our faction believed that the organized labor movement and the masses of people it represents should not be subordinated to any intellectual elite. If there is anything basic to being a socialist, a democratic socialist, that has to be it. When democracy comes into conflict with elites, we stand with democracy. And if we have some intellectual ability and had the luck to get an education, instead of using our education to advance the interests of the intellectual elite, we use it to support the movements of the masses against priestly intellectual classes and against all those who would use status, money or any other kind of power to dominate human beings and deny them their democratic expression.

But that's all the past. There are some lessons for you there, but I think the future will be different. The future of our movement and the future of social democracy in the United States will depend on our relationship with the labor movement. I'm working for the Steelworkers and I talk to a lot of labor people, and we've found something which is very important for you to know about. Within the labor movement now there are many young people who have either a high school education or some years of college. A lot of them are laid off now because of the economy. They are articualte, they are interested in ideas. They've learned something about the workplace and organizing because they're in the labor movement. Many of them are presidents of union locals; others are coming into the labor movement. The older guys are resisting them because they're afraid of their education, knowledge and energy.

There are enormous human resources in the labor movement both among these young workers and among the older workers, though they can't articulate things as well. The outcome of the conflict between labor and conservatism will depend on whether labor can bring its human resources to bear and encourage political awareness and activism among its members, especially its younger ones. Our ideology is a good one to go with labor's organization because it reaches out to all kinds of people. It articulates what labor's really about: that it's not just another special interest group, but speaks for all elements of society which are exploited.

Of course, we can't just go in there to give labor an ideology; we have to go in there to help people develop. What's interesting about these younger people -- and I think it's very important to you -- is that there is something they want. I was talking with some young steelworkers, and they were telling me

about how hard it is to get young people interested in coming to meetings. After talking a lot we figured out that there's something that the young people in the labor movement want that labor's not organized to give them. They want more opportunity, and rewards based on their ability. Now in the workplace rewards come not by ability but by seniority. That's right as an economic principle for distributing work, but labor has to figure out some way to fill the younger people's needs.

One of the ways these younger people can get that feeling of reward and opportunity for leadership is in the political arena: helping to build labor's operation, going into politics as part of the labor movement. Another way is involvement in decision-making in the workplace. The managerial class cannot solve the production problem. Labor people have more of a long term interest in plants than management does; if a plant closes, the managers will get hired somewhere else, but the workers become unemployed. Organized workers in the plants are beginning to think about how to make the operation more productive as an alternative to closing the plant. There are going to be committees on it in plants, and workers will have to get involved in ways they've never done before, in decision making, in all kinds of things. There'll be a place for a certain type of young person in these two areas. If Young Social Democrats can contribute to labor's efforts to develop its own political machine, our movement will take a big jump forward.

You can make an enormous contribution. But you cannot do it thinking that trade unionists have nothing to teach you. They can teach you about organization. They can teach you hundreds of things about dealing with reality, about organizations and movements, about how you work with working people and how it's not so easy with just straight ideology. But you also have a lot to teach them: about ideology, about political thinking, about political action in the Democratic Party and elsewhere. If there's a coming together, a mutually constructive interrelationship between Young Social Democrats and young trade unionists, we can make a very important contribution both to the labor movement and to social democracy in the United States.